**Fear, resignation, and faith: Mexican Undocumentalities in Dallas-Fort Worth**

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**Abstract:**

This article centers undocumented Mexican immigrant’s feelings towards their legal status in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan area. Analyzing the complexity of immigration policy implementation and leveraging Foucault’s concept of governmentality, the goal is to gain insight into the lived experiences of Mexican undocumented immigrants, often written about but seldom centered in the literature. I propose the concept of undocumentalities to understand the way undocumented people internalize their circumstances, reflected in the emotional responses and practical techniques they develop to deal with them. The analysis is based on original survey results, interviews and conversations had while gathering the data. This article focuses on the context of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan Area (DFW) to show how various levels of government and other institutions interact to structure an immigration policy regime and the effect that it has on undocumented people’s feelings. The article zooms in on the Dallas Metro area as a particular setting given that the realities of policy implementation on the ground vary greatly and are thus always localized, even when federal immigration directives address the national level. I find experiences evoking fear, resignation, anger, sadness, and hope. The concept of undocumentalities highlights a range of emotions towards state persecution and expands our understanding of the implications of immigration policy.

**Keywords**: Undocumented immigrants, Mexicans, US Immigration Policy, Governmentality, Feelings, Sanctuary Cities, Dallas-Fort Worth

**Introduction**

The statement that undocumented people generally fear the state is an uncontroversial one. Many of them are generally avoidant of going out due to the risk of deportation and strive to be discrete about their status (Asad, 2020). Past research has shown how the undocumented condition has an impact on people’s feelings towards policing, generally making them more fearful than their more documented counterparts (Salinas, 2023). The findings, however, have been far from uniform, showing significant variation, and sometimes counterintuitive attitudes, depending on numerous an array of characteristics such as gender, class, and economic status (Salinas, 2023).

The realities of immigration enforcement corner most undocumented people to live their lives avoiding contact with the government. This implies two elements in relation: the application of immigration policy and the impact that it is has on immigrant’s lives. These two elements are best understood as vary greatly. On the one hand, Immigration policy has a national, state, county and city levels. “Undocumented Immigrants in the country” as, Abrego states “experience illegality in diverse ways, depending on a series of factors” (2014). According to Abrego, immigrants develop varying toolkits, composed of emotional and practical techniques which she terms “illegalities”. This means having a family, owning property in their country of origin, gender, and age, among other characteristics, define the tools that a person has at their disposal to deal with their immigration status (Abrego, 2014).

This paper attempts to assess the prevalence of fear and explore other feelings that accompany these illegalities, which I call undocumentalities. It is important here to clarify the variation between the two concepts: illegalities is a sociopolitical condition placed upon undocumented people which they deal with in diverse ways, while the second refers to ways this condition is internalized by individuals and experienced emotionally. While these concepts overlap, “illegalities” centers practical techniques, while “undocumentalites” focuses on feelings.

Undocumentalities must then be understood as emotional coping techniques, collective or personal, that reflect both each person’s positionality and possibilities in terms of their relationship with the nation state. As such, there is not one undocumentality, but rather undocumentalities: a panoply of feelings, and thoughts that result from the interaction between being deemed “illegal” and each person’s experience. As research of border interactions with Immigration officials at ports of entry has shown, the feelings people have towards the immigration regime depends on their status (Castañeda Perez, 2022).

I analyze undocumented Mexican immigrants’ feelings of fear, resignation, and faith towards their legal status through a survey (N = 414) conducted at the Mexican consulate and eight interviews with respondents. This research focuses on the context of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan Area (DFW) to analyze variation under a localized immigration enforcement context. Federal, state, county and city levels of government interact to structure an immigration regime that is always local (Bruce, 2017). In DFW, punitive policies are present at the federal and state level, while variations are found among local governments. This offers an interesting case of how these interact between them and with other institutions, such as consulates and churches.

In this endeavor, I will engage with literature in political science, immigration studies and governmentality. On the one hand, political science has mostly dealt with the experience of undocumented people as a public opinion issue for voters[[1]](#footnote-1). On the other hand, the application of the concept of governmentality in immigration studies has mostly focused on the set up of institutions and the creation of regimes of power through policy. This article departs from these bodies of work in two ways.

The departure from political science lies in highlighting the feelings of unauthorized residents towards state policies directed at them as a subject of the discipline. The political system has emotional dimensions to its governance (Foucault, 2004) as prominent research in American Politics has shown, impacting the political behavior of different racial groups (Phoenix, 2019), partisan polarization (Iynegar et al, 2019) and views on political events (Small et al, 2006). However, the feelings of undocumented people (as nonvoters and non-citizens) have not been incorporated. I see this as a gap for a two main reasons.

The first is rather self-explanatory: immigration policy is political, and all its implications should be studied as part of the discipline. The second is that immigration has become a mobilizing issue for many voters. Even when undocumented people cannot vote, many Latines[[2]](#footnote-2) share ties of solidarity due to the kinship and social connections (Walker et al, 2019; Walker et al, 2020; Reny et al, 2018). Also, threats to immigrants are often racialized, and have resulted in the mobilization of people with Latine backgrounds (Gutierrez et al, 2019). Latines considered immigration as one of their top issues of interest in 2016 and 2020 (Ocampo et al, 2021), and as such, it is not only a matter of how levels of government are able to resist attempts of other institutions to harden the immigration regime, but also about the electoral consequences these initiatives might have. This varies with geography and other demographic markers among voters (Frasure-Yokley & Wilcox-Archuleta, 2019). In other words, while undocumented immigrants are not citizens, they are part of society, and this is a key element of the political relevance of their condition. Their emotions matter for political science because they matter to voters, be them family members, coethnics, or even political detractors.

The second departure is from governmentality as understood in immigration studies. Here I propose an adaptation of the concept of governmentality to analyze its impacts on non-citizens, rather than citizens. I propose an approach in which the citizen is decentered, and the undocumented resident is understood as a negated subject of the polity. Conceptions of governmentality in immigration studies have often focused on nationals, rather than on the immigrants themselves. Here the emphasis is on the effects of a localized immigration policy regime has on people’s feelings.

**Foucault in Dallas-Fort-Worth: Governmentality and Immigration Studies**

Michel Foucault’s idea of governmentality considers state power as applied through psychological discipline. This concept defies traditional conceptions of power, by explaining how state institutions put forth structures that are internalized both individually and through culture.

Governmentality refers to the feelings and mental structures generated by state institutions, norms, and ideas. The state generates regulations, and their implementation teaches and incentivizes certain mentalities while punishing others. In this way, state power delineates the contours of what should be felt and thought by people, shaping their sense of duty and of right and wrong (Foucault, 2004). Governmentality is useful to analyze government action in the present because it provides a general framework to understand how discourse, social structures and material forms configure spaces and social dynamics that produce power and hierarchy. Other scholars in political science have used Foucault’s concept of governmentality to analyze the US immigration regime (Fassin, 2011), the punitive tactics employed in that regime (Cisneros, 2016), (Valdez, 2016), the immigration law that permits it (Constable, 1993),

At this point, it is key to consider the critiques leveled at Foucault’s thought, such as the erasure of the subject’s will in favor of the power of the social structure and – more importantly for this argument, the subsequent foreclosure of positional thinking (Spivak, 2010). In this instance, the dialogue between immigration studies and governmentality should be “*better modelled as one of encounter rather than application, since the idea of an encounter presumes that what we understand by migration, but also governmentality will change when these two phenomena are brought togethe*r.” (Walters, 2015). Here, governmentality will be used to refer to the place where state institutions intersect with the formation of subjectivities and lived realities (Walters, 2015), and that is always a specific location, rather than the abstract structures Foucault talks about. In this case, the marginalized subjectivities of undocumented people in the context of their immigration status.

The main adaptation that we must make to governmentality so it can clarify the effects of immigration policy on undocumented immigrant’s feelings of their condition relates to the fact that governmentality is thought of as a mechanism to control the state’s citizens. The modern state, justified in the rational administration of the nation, has power to impact both its “population” and the people that it excludes from the political community.

Gervin Apatinga unpacks the anti-immigration argument for the biopolitical control of the state over undocumented immigrants. He states that “*The central characteristic of power now is not deduction and subjugation of life as it was in the days of the arbitrary sovereign king but rather focuses more attention to regulating and improving the conditions of human life and making them sustainable.”* (Apatinga, 2017). Under this logic, full rights are afforded to the “citizens” that belong to the body politic and none are conceded to the “illegitimate” inhabitants, seen as a threat to security whose lives are expendable. As such they suffer more brutal version of what governmentality can do: they are not a population to be managed, but an anti-population, an un-documented *alien*. Undocumented people’s governmentality is that of an excluded subject.

The governmentality for the excluded, the mindsets that ae formed in the midst of state prosecution both punitive and psychological, is what here I call governmentality. It is indexed in term of affects, as understood by Cifor (2016). She defines affect as “Forces that create relationships (conscious or unconscious, between the body and the world. They are at the center of how we create, keep and break social relations and collective identities”. The focus of affect theory is thinking of subjectivity in relation to power and giving a strong emphasis on a person’s positionality. In this case, undocumentalites are the emotional responses to immigration policy, an affective narrative that connects the political reality with the subjective experience of immigrants. In the following section, we will analyze the case of DFW as a scenario for analyzing the prevalence of fear among undocumented immigrants and analyzing some of the affects that create their undocumentalities.

**Topology on the ground: Trump, Abbott, and the City of Dallas**

In terms of the history of US federal immigration policy, the story in recent decades is one of general continuity, with variation on the specifics. The wall in the Mexico-US border started construction during the 1990s (Hunter, 1994). More importantly, mass deportation is the status quo in immigration policy, and it has been that way for decades (Martinez et al, 2018). Obama is correctly remembered by many immigrants I spoke to as having deported more people than Trump (Pew, 2020), even when his deportation priorities were focused on people with criminal records. The Biden administration has continued this general policy with some changes, as can be seen in statements by Vice President Harris (“Do not come” (BBC, 2021)) and Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas (“The border is closed, the border is secure” (Washington Post, 2021)).

However, specifics matter a great deal, and as such it is paramount to acknowledge the unique punitiveness of Trump’s policies. Verea lists the antiimmigrant policies of the Trump administration as follows:

“significantly increasing the criminalization of immigrants; considerably raising the number of detentions of non-criminal undocumented migrants; responding aggressively to sanctuary policies; (attempting to) put an end to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) of more than one million immigrants; appreciably decreasing refugee admissions; banning Muslims from entering the U.S.; and very inhumanly and cruelly separating families at the border, among other measures” (Verea, 2018)

In the case of the State of Texas, the use of sanctuary policies by cities was officially outlawed by a bill called SB4 in 2017 (Bruce, 2017). This law forbade cities and police departments from engaging in sanctuary policies, threatening them with lawsuits if they did not comply. This had extreme implications for the approximately 1.6 million undocumented people living in the state.

Texas governor, Gregory W. Abbot has very much followed Trump’s playbook of establishing immigrants as the target of his rhetoric and policies. Abbot has been criticized due to his “invasion” framing on immigration. Appealing to the narrative of lack of action by the federal government and nodding to Anglo-Texan nationalism, he launched “Operation Lone Star” as a border security policy. This strategy focuses on increasing surveillance at the border, both at official ports of entry and between them. Abbot has also used disaster declarations to take extraordinary actions in border communities and pushed the narrative of the federal government not doing enough to tackle the “crisis at the border.” He has ordered the arrest of immigrants on state charges, used the National Guard to support the Border Patrol and transformed a state prison into a detention center (García, 2021). In Texas, A key structural constraint that influences undocumented people’s feelings of safety/fear is requirement of proof of legal residency to obtain a driver’s license. This means that any police stop can result in an encounter with the court system, given that it is a crime to drive without a license.

The one level of government in which some undocumented immigrants in DFW have reprieve is the city level. The City of Dallas was certified as the first “Welcoming City” in Texas in 2019. Beyond the certification, this is important because it reflects the work of the Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs Office in the city, which was created in part as a pro immigrant response to the Trump Presidency (Bruce, 2017). It also excludes the use of the word sanctuary, avoiding conflict with the SB4 bill. As part of this initiative, Dallas has also organized naturalization workshops and a program called “*Unidos*” where local law enforcement in several cities in the area host events where immigrants receive “*first-hand information in a safe environment concerning their rights when interacting with local law enforcement”* (Bruce, 2017). This at least partially recognizes immigrants as members of the political community. The city also provides legal assistance to undocumented immigrants facing deportation.

. To account for the variability of local implementation when applying governmentality, Collier proposes a topological approach concerned with: “*how spaces are organized, with the connectivity properties that arise from certain arrangements of elements*” (Collier 2009). Bruce makes an incisive analysis of multilevel immigration governance in the United States:

“Immigratory policy in the United States is heavily influenced by a complicated mosaic that involves decisions made at the county, city, and state levels, all of which have tangible effects on the daily lives of undocumented immigrants. Each level of government has the potential to enact policies in specific domains that transform invisible administrative borders that are largely ignored by most citizens into real internal borders that circumscribe undocumented migrants’ forms of mobility, employment possibilities, and access to public services” (Bruce, 2017).

This gives a picture of an immigration regime that changes across state lines and even between counties. As Benjamin Bruce states: *“it* *is entirely possible for an undocumented resident of a given urban area to be faced with contradictory policies at the city, county, and state levels, which moreover can change radically over time*.” (2017). As we shall see below, this complex array of policies interacts with people’s specific situations to generate diverse feelings towards the condition of being undocumented.

Civil society, churches and Mexican consulates are also actors in this dynamic. These actors engage activities that help protect, inform, and assist undocumented people in the face of the overwhelming prosecution. This, however, is not the status quo in the whole metropolitan area. Other counties are known as being more stringent collaborators of state and federal immigration policy (Bruce, 2017). In contrast, Tarrant County (Fort Worth) has a program in place since 2017 that permits Sheriff’s deputies to act as ICE agents in local prisons (KERA News 2021). The independence of local police and sheriff’s departments make the scene within the DFW metropolitan area complex, with some areas and counties being known for cooperating with ICE and others having welcoming policies in place.

Summing up, the immigration policy regime undocumented people in DFW face consists of a federal policy of mass deportation, family separation and deterrence. On a state policy level, the strategy is one of expansion of national tendencies and an even more constant political speech of dehumanization. On the local level, the efforts by city governments, churches and consulates create spaces of sanctuary in some areas (mainly in the City of Dallas), while others are subjected to police collaboration with immigration enforcement (notably in Tarrant County). This generates a context where rules change within a few miles, sometimes on people’s daily routes. I set out to analyze the spectrum of mentalities indexed by feelings lived by Mexican undocumented immigrants in this daily institutional obstacle course.

**Methodology**

The data used here come from a *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnologia* (CONACYT) project called “Sanctuary Cities Project as Emerging Borders”. Fielding a mass, in-person survey was one of the main objectives of the project. The team I am a part of administered the instrument in 2022 and 2023 in DFW, Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, Phoenix, and New York. This survey was supported by a CONACYT grant meant to ask undocumented Mexican immigrants in the US about diverse topics. After coordinating with consular authorities, we approached respondents in and around Mexican Consulates. The sample was made up of people that had been in the US for 3 years or longer, over the age of 18 and excluding people under DACA protections.

People were approached when they were waiting for their turn to enter the consulate or while they were waiting for their documents to be delivered to them. Their immigration status was never directly asked, but rather estimated through filter questions. The filter questions and the rationale behind them is explained in the following table.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Filter Question | Reasoning |
| Do you have a consular ID?” | This is a form of ID that is almost exclusively used by undocumented people given that it is easier to obtain than a passport and is still an official ID. |
| “Have you gone to Mexico in the last 3 years?”, | Undocumented people usually do not return to Mexico given the difficulty of crossing irregularly. |
| “Do you have an updated driver’s license?” | In Texas, undocumented people cannot access drivers’ licenses. |
| “Do you have a social security number?”. | Undocumented immigrants cannot obtain a legal social security number. |

The final question in the survey asked the respondent if they would like to participate in an interview.

. This article will take insight from three data sources: the 414 survey responses in Dallas, the recorded interviews, and the hundreds of conversations I had while surveying peopleThe interviews were semi structured and based on the respondent’s survey answers. The surveys and interviews will be interpreted as part of a relational interview approach, where meaning is created between the respondents and the researcher (Fuji, 2018). This seems particularly fitting for a research agenda that centers the effect of government policy on people’s mentality and feelings. It was the interviewing experience and the analysis of the interview audio what inspired the theoretical framework and interpretation presented here, even when the starting point was an interest in the prevalence of fear.

The interviews and open-ended answers from survey respondents will be thematically coded and analyzed using Atlas TI, a discourse analysis software. The conversations I had with survey respondents will be included according to their relevance. The results of the analysis will be presented thematically, analyzing feelings of fear, safety, resignation, and the role of different institutions in configuring the regime of immigration policy in DFW[[3]](#footnote-3).

**Survey Responses: Measuring Fear**

In the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan area, we had a total of 404 respondents, 216men, 188 women. Descriptive statistics for the responses can be found in Table 1 below. Their median time in the US is 18 years, the median age is 39. Question 81 of the survey asked: “Do you currently fear being detained or deported?”. In this case 224 people report being afraid of deportation in any degree, while 190 said they did not fear it at all.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the sample

Tabla

Descripción generada automáticamente

Table 2 Gendered distribution of Fear.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Fear of deportation breakdown** | | | |
|  | Total | Men | Women |
| None | 189 | 101 | 88 |
| A little | 108 | 55 | 53 |
| Some | 73 | 39 | 32 |
| A lot | 36 | 21 | 15 |
| Total | 406 | 216 | 188 |
| Total with fear | 217 | 115 | 100 |
| Percentage with fear | 53% | 53% | 53% |

In this survey some items refer to fear of immigration policy during the Trump Presidency. Question 62 reads: “*When Donald Trump was president, did you go out less or were more careful to go out*?” For this question 16 said they went out less, 93 said they took more precautions and 70 people answered that both were true for a total of 179 that altered their behavior. Another 228 said they did not take any additional precautions, resulting in a little more than half of respondents reporting no changes in their feelings of fear between the Trump and Biden administrations. In another Trump related question, respondents were asked the following: “Did these feelings of fear change during the Trump administration?” We once again find a close to even split, with a little over half the respondents reporting increased fear. After, survey workers asked respondents what strategies they employed to deal with their fear. They were offered predetermined options, but people could also input their own choice of words. The answers to these questions are presented in Table 2.

Table 3 Other Fear related questions.

Tabla

Descripción generada automáticamente

In the open-ended responses, people answered that faith in God and purposefully avoiding news as coping mechanisms were ways to deal with their feelings of fear. Some said that being scared was such a characteristic of undocumented life, that not showing fear is a way to appear less suspicious. A hostile immigration policy, racism, and administrative vulnerabilities make this one of the preeminent emotions that characterize undocumentalities. Survey results also show most people believe ICE surveils social media to guide their immigration actions, adding a digital dimension to immigration prosecution.

In sum, fear is present in about half of the respondents, with variation when measured differently. We can also see that while the amount of people that were fearful during the Trump and Biden administrations is basically identical, the intensity of the fear did increase during the Trump presidency. Rather than a majority, a little over half of undocumented Mexican respondents in this survey report fearing deportation, which is a surprising finding. Some of it could be explained by the reticence of people to tell a stranger they are afraid, or how afraid they are. However, it is clear that fear is not the only affect present in immigrants undocumentalities in DFW. While the gendered groups show little variance, a regression analysis shows that older age and more time in the US are associated with more fear of deportation (Appendix). Age could be explained in terms of the difficulty of returning, while time in the US could be associated with having more to lose from being deported. In the following sections I will qualitatively explore the role fear and other emotions play as part of the undocumentalities of the survey respondents, by analyzing open ended answers and interviews.

**American Carnage: Fear as a hallmark of undocumentalities**

A key aspect of the fear undocumented people express in the interviews is a permanent wariness of revealing their immigration status. Besides administrative reasons, it is also because reactions are mostly negative from citizens and specifically from white people. Immigrants stated fear of being directly reported with ICE: “*Your say ´hi´ from a distance but avoid having deeper relationships with your neighbors, (…) you know that the information you give to them can be used against you*” (*Francisca*, woman, 42 years old, 21 years in the US). For this reason, people do not discuss their status with others and try to mostly stay at home to avert risk: *“People know when you are undocumented the moment you take out your Consular ID. When you do not speak in English and by the kind of work you do they know you are undocumented*.” (*Francisca*). Fear of being reported and deported is one of the hallmarks of many undocumentalities, and this affect has a decisive impact in the way they develop relationships with the people around them.

An interviewee said the following about how the immigration system makes her, and her husband feel: “*Honestly, we do the hardest jobs, the jobs nobody wants, so they need us, they need workers, but they make us feel like we must beg them for jobs. And they intimidate us, make us scared, the system they use is cruel to be honest. They instigate fear, they hurt us emotionally*.” (*Estela* 35, 6 years in the US). This woman sees clearly that there is an emotional economy tied to undocumentality at play here, that ultimately serves “their” interests.

This “*ellos[[4]](#footnote-4)*” represents an oppressive and complex government/white continuum, simply called “them” or “*los gabachos/bolillos[[5]](#footnote-5)*” by many of the people I spoke with. “*Ellos*” prosecute through immigration policy, “*ellos*” racially profile, and “*ellos*” engage in abusive behavior as supervisors at work. Many feel that things do not have to be like this: “*So many people are undocumented. For example, the trailer[[6]](#footnote-6). Ellos could have given them a work visa. People do not want to stay here. If there were ways to do it, people would come and go*.” (*Francisca*). The use of this pronoun to name the alterity of American society denotes the othering that the undocumented condition imprints on the mentality of people.

When talking about fear, the Trump presidency featured prominently. One person wrote in the open-ended survey responses: “*When Trump was president, I did not go out to avoid aggressive people*”. The same issue was raised by an interviewee: “*During the Trump presidency, road rage was more common. It is as if whites thought the street was theirs*” (*Julian*, man, 60 years old, 30 years in the US). *Julian* also spoke about how he changed his behavior during the Trump presidency: “*I went out less to the street, driving in the most correct way possible to avoid contact with the police. There was a little more racism then (…)”.* He also said he avoids events (like dances) with a lot of Latines for fear of immigration raids. The behavior incentivized by immigration policy is one of isolation.

In the social aspect, there is a general sense that racist people were empowered by Trump to voice their prejudice, with multiple people reporting instances of neighbors, business owners and potential renters discriminating against them for being undocumented. One survey respondent said a potential renter told her to “*take your money and go back to your country*” when she inferred her immigration status because she did not have US identifications. These testimonies show how undocumentalities are structured around both official and social prosecution, showing a case of traditional governmentality at work: some citizens believe it is their duty to uphold immigration law as civilians.

The patchwork of hardline and welcoming policies in the DFW area described above is very clear to undocumented people. Narratives of encounters with police are varied across different areas. Sheriff’s departments are perceived as more hawkish towards detaining undocumented people through racial profiling, and their county wide jurisdiction makes them a constant threat. Even when people live in a welcoming area, some said that knowing that other cities are taking antiimmigrant measures generates fear and anxiety. One interviewee reported that during the Trump presidency rumors started to go around saying that even citizens could get in trouble for housing undocumented relatives. To this interviewee, the racial overtones of Trump’s rhetoric and policy are clear: “*That man had this politics of inciting people to think that if you are not white, you are in trouble. Even people that were born here have been deported, sent to Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala*” (*Julian*).

When it comes to traveling outside DFW, people are clear about the internal borders generated by the 100-mile zone where the Border Patrol operates. None of the interviewees go near this area, generating the hard limit for undocumented people’s mobility. A man I spoke with was unable to attend a parole hearing in another state after being released from jail because the bus route to his destination crossed this area. Since he did not have a passport, he could not take a plane. Most respondents said that they travel to other states where border patrol does not operate, suggesting air travel is quite safe for undocumented folks on national flights. Even so, many are hesitant to fly. This shows that fear goes as far as depriving undocumented people from engaging in things that they could do, such as flying in national flights: not punitive, but emotional control is the limiting factor in this instance.

People agree on the cities in DFW that are dangerous, naming the same three constantly, showing that these subjective pressures are a collective reality Besides cooperation with immigration enforcement, people also report that police will not go to some Latinx neighborhoods. When talking about statewide travel people do get around and visit other cities in the state, but always with extreme care. The account of illegalities with regards to traveling in the state is unanimous: “*it is dangerous, there is no safe space, it is complicated. We plan our trips to avoid stopping at certain place and when you are invited somewhere you do not know, you do not go. You do not go just to know places; you go because you are going to do something.”* (*Estela*).

In terms of federal enforcement, immigration checkpoints are rare in DFW. Workplace raids are more common, but some people report that they have never seen the border patrol or ICE in their time in the city. The fear comes mostly from raids, police stops and anonymous reports. The general thread in this regard is a crushing uncertainty brought about by an inescapable feeling of vulnerability. The conjunction of social pressures, governmental policies and rumors generate a climate of prosecution: “*We feel accosted*” said one of the people I spoke with. Another, a woman in her sixties, compared the prospect of obtaining papers to getting an aspirin for a never-ending headache (*Cecilia*, woman, 63 years old, 24 years in the US). This is consistent to a popular answer in the survey when people were asked how they cope with their fear: “*I do nothing because nothing can make my fear change.”*

**Resignation: *“Everyone promises, and nobody fixes our status”***

Although many undoubtedly fear deportation, other affects are present in people’s relationship to their immigration status. As we saw in the survey results above, this is a constant through the Biden and Trump administrations. According to the Collaborative Multiracial Post Election Survey in 2016, 34% of Latine respondents believe that neither party is better than the other on immigration (Barreto et al,2017). This is consistent with some interviewee’s opinions.

“Everyone promises and nobody fixes our status, be them good or bad politicians. People must find other ways to fix their situation during this presidency, the previous and probably the next one (..) It is always the same story, I have been here for 30 years, and we have never seen anything (...) I think most Hispanics share this perspective.” (*Julian*)

In the survey question asking how people deal with fear of deportation, a lot of resignation can be found. Some examples or answers are the following: “*I do nothing, I just live my life.”, “It is what it is.”, “There is nothing I can do to have less fear.”* Many people also had a reading of deportation as a non-tragic event as the next two quotes exemplify: “*If they kick me out, they are going to send me home anyway, and no one is going to deport me from Mexico”* (*Cecilia*). *“I am not afraid. If they deport me, they will send me back to where I was born. My children are grown up, my wife is a citizen, they could go to Mexico to see me if it happened”* (*Julian*). In these two quotes we can dilucidate the close relationship between positionality and undocumentalities, in line with Abrego’s (2014) and Castañeda Perez’s (2022) findings. Stay-at-home, undocumented parents said they try to go out as little as possible. Meanwhile, parents of grown-up sons and daughters were more relaxed in terms of the prospect of deportation. Grandchildren can complicate this, but the general pattern stands, given that as US citizens, their grandchildren could potentially visit their deported grandparents.

Instead of fear, these people face their vulnerable position with a combination of flexibility and resignation. As we have seen, even when Trump’s rhetoric did scare some people, the bipartisan nature of aggressive immigration policy is not lost on undocumented people. Many received the Trump presidency with the idea that things would not change, for good or bad, regardless of who occupies the White House.

“In the time that Trump was president, we heard him a lot in the news, that he wanted to change laws and that Mexicans were rapists and stuff. But my brothers that have been here longer told me that they had lived that fear before. When Obama was president there were more deportations, but with Trump the talk was louder. He was not the person that deported more people, he was just the one that raised the most rabble.” (*Jonas*, man, 56 years old, 6 years in the US).

Francisca agrees that the democrats do not offer much hope: “The other one (Biden) doesn’t say anything but he is not good either” (Francisca). Resignation is a logical answer given that change is always promised, never delivered.

**Sadness and Anger in undocumentalities: “*I have nightmares about it.*”**

One of the most common emotions expressed by interviewees and survey respondents with regards to their situation was sadness. Many are separated from part of their families due to their incapacity to return, and fear being separated from their immediate family by deportation or detention.

“Imagine that. I do not want to be kicked out, but I want to go (to Mexico). Sometimes I dream that I go. But in my dream, I am terrorized because I wonder ‘How I am going to return home?’. Do you understand? I am dreaming and I think ‘Oh I am glad I came to see my family’ but at the same time I feel terror because I do not know how I am going to return home. It is very hard. I mean I have nightmares about it. I am sorry I am getting emotional but, that is how things are. This is reality. [Long pause]

It is sad and heavy. I have my family there, I do not see them, I send them money when I can. I cannot go, they cannot come. When I think about it, I cry. It is very frustrating because you had to leave, and you can never return. I had to leave my family. My great-grandmother is there, she is 97 years old, and I really love her. I have not seen her in 21 years. My grandparents, my mom. It is very heavy. But we hold on to God. And we console ourselves with what we can.” (*Francisca*)

*Francisca* remembered the Trump presidency as a time when the aggressive rhetoric took a heavy toll on her mental health because she worried about what would happen to her children: “*I fell into a depression because they were saying that they were going to deport all of the parents and that we had to arrange for someone to take care of the kids here if we were deported.*” (*Francisca*). Another interviewee mentioned that she left her home as little as possible during her first three years in the country, for fear of being deported to a random place in Mexico. These testimonies exemplify the vulnerability undocumented people have to political rhetoric.

This sadness is often accompanied by an anger and frustration about the fact that they feel nothing will change. “*I feel impotent, I feel angry, I feel abused, swindled. We pay taxes but do not get the benefits. For example, when everyone got checks [the pandemic stimulus checks], they did not give anything to us. It makes me feel impotent, it bothers me. I feel used and abused.”* (*Francisca*).

**Reprieve from Prosecution:** **Community, Churches, Consulates and Sanctuary efforts**

Both the churches that provide “parochial IDs” and the Mexican consulates with their provision of passports and consular IDs can help bring some peace to people, knowing they at least have a chance if they are stopped by the police in a welcoming area. These services can be said to dispute their condition since they literally provide documentation with which they can accredit their identity, if not their immigration status. This provides people with tools that can be of help and as such mitigate the climate of fear by giving marginal certainty. Even when recognizing the mitigating effects of welcoming/sanctuary policies, church and consulate services should be understood in context. *Estela* said *“We have less fear but there is always fear. That is why we avoid going out, even with sanctuary cities.”*

Further, Churches provide spaces for socialization that are safe. *Cecilia* said. “*The church is the environment where I move*”. Shunned from the political community, religious circles are a key socialization sites for many Mexican immigrants. When asked to describe her daily routes, *Cecilia* highlighted only four places: her home, her daughter’s home, her work, and the church. This shows the centrality of family and religion as institutions in many undocumented people’s lives. The church also provides community and a sense of safety to people: *“The church is everything for us, outside of it we are nothing and inside we have everything*” (*Cecilia*). *“I know that if I am just, God will look after me”* (*Gabriela,* *woman, 47 years old, 21 years in the US)*).

The interplay of religious identity and immigration status also shows a complexity of emotional responses. While God is seen as a source or reprive, the moral stances of the church complicate the view of the political system. When I asked *Francisca* if she would vote for a candidate that opened regularization routes for undocumented immigrants or one that would support her religious beliefs, she articulated her position as follows:

“*I would give more weight to my religious beliefs. Look, I do not have papers and it is difficult for me, but I can defend myself. A child in the womb cannot defend themselves. So, it is my job to defend them, and do you know who will defend me? God, because, you know what? I do not have US citizenship. I need it and it makes it very hard for me (not having it), but I can win my citizenship in heaven. I do not know about you but for me my eternal citizenship is very important.*”

In contrast, Cecilia said this about the Trump presidency vis-à-vis her faith: “He did scare us, but I believe that God can do anything, and I see that guy (Trump) as a poor man with problems. And religious people, all kinds of them, all the Christians, they believe anything Trump says. But it was all lies, he was just trying to win votes.”

Coexisting with the fear, sadness and anger I have characterized in the last sections, there are also positive feelings associated with the immigrant experience in the US. Many interviewees reported feeling at home in DFW: “*At first, I wanted time to pass for me to return to Mexico. Now that my daughters are married and have children, why would I leave?” (Gabriela)*

“*In the town I live in, I feel I have been adopted as a citizen, everybody here knows me and respects me for my work, even police officers know I am undocumented, and they have never looked down on me”* (*Julian*). Regardless of legal status and fear of being reported to ICE, people establish connections to the places they live in, developing a sense belonging that goes beyond the state. Family members, neighbors, and friends can become a source of recognition that the government does not fully control: community.

People mentioned police programs that seek to generate trust with the community in some areas, showing how local initiatives can counteract federal and state policies. Interviewees also reported some police officers take any kind of ID in police stops to verify they are not wanted criminals. This however is marked by the ample discretion officers have when enforcing immigration policy. *Bryan’s* (man, 19 years old, 3 years in the US) narration of his encounter with the police in a city in DFW known for harsh enforcement exemplifies this:

“The officer spoke Spanish; he was also Latino. He asked, ‘Do you have insurance?’, and I said, ‘I think so’, but I didn’t even know what that was. He said, ‘Here it says you do not’ and the car was not in my name yet. I told him I had just bought the car. I told him the name of the previous owner. In the end he said he would just give me a warning because I was clearly clueless (laughs). He was nice but my brother was scared because we had three police cars surrounding us. (…) At that time, I didn’t have a passport, I showed him an old school ID just to identify myself”.

**Conclusion**

The localized implementation of immigration policy regime conditions the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants producing feelings in relation to their illegality, which I call undocumentalites. Being faced with living in the shadows as an undocumented person brings about the need to adapt to realities not confronted by citizens or legal residents. Undocumented people face a state that has much less regard for their lives and well-being. People form undocumentalities, a mindset for living and coping whose configuration is defined by a mix of feelings that can include fear, resignation, faith and belonging.

The main findings of this endeavor are thus. First, it is clear to undocumented people that they are second class citizens in the face of the US government. The ominous “*ellos*” in undocumented people’s narratives in DFW shows a clear distinction between citizens and non-citizens, and between Latines and whites. People also report being discriminated against in various spheres of life due to being undocumented, not only in official settings, showing how citizens’ governmentalities interact with immigrants’ undocumentalities. It is important to recognize at this point that people that are in the consulate represent a particular group vis-à-vis the total undocumented population. In terms of the assessment of fear, this could mean the findings of this article are conservative, given that people that go to the consulate dare go to places outside the necessary.

Some people live in fear and have nightmares that reflect their constant state of tension. Even in the face of racialized threats and an aggressive immigration policy that persecutes them, people attached other affects to their immigration status. Some report not being afraid because immigration policy has always been the same, regardless of the party in power. They show resignation to an unchanging climate of prosecution. Also present are feelings of anger and sadness at the injustices they perceive in the way the state treats them.

Legal status would be the proverbial aspirin to solve the headache that pains *Cecilia*. So, most people must learn to live with the headache and find techniques to minimize their vulnerability. Religious faith is another emotion to deal with the abject position of the undocumented; both in terms of community and as a source of alternative documentation.

As confirmed by undocumented people’s accounts, the application of immigration policy is extremely complex. The constant is uncertainty. Even when the Consulate and the Church can help undocumented people by providing IDs that can help deescalate a police encounter, their usefulness is limited by the local variation among police departments and counties. If someone is stopped by a motivated Sheriff or reported by a civilian informant, there is little a parochial or consular ID can be good for.

The idea that immigration status generates different responses depending on the policy context and personal characteristics is key to consider when approaching immigration as a political issue for voters with personal relationships with the undocumented. It can also help develop interventions that are multifaceted for institutions seeking to support undocumented populations. One possible intervention could be the opening of mental health services at consulates, alongside the existing health and indigenous services.

Multiple prospects appear for the advancement of a research agenda centering undocumentalities. The state treats undocumented people with the hardest of psychological violence and takes steps to make their lives difficult on every turn. The finding that people find reprieve in faith, and the connection that this has with vocally supporting Republicans warrants further attention. Also, the comparison with Los Angeles, Chicago and other contexts is the logical next step in the framework of the *Ciudades Santuario como Fronteras Emergentes* Project.

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1. Notable exceptions include Mendez Garcia & Sadhwani, 2022, Street, Jones-Correa & Zepeda Millán, 2017, Salinas, 2023 and Solano, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Throughout I use the "Latine” as a neutral term, and use “Latina” and “Latino” when referring to women and men in particular. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On an ethical note, I will say it is fundamental for me not to cause harm to the people that kindly spoke to me and answered the survey. For this reason, names of interviewees were changed, and no specific areas are mentioned. Even when this information could be useful for future researchers, the same is true for entrepreneurial immigration officers and misuse of this research is a possibility I want to avoid as much as possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “*Ellos”* means “they” in Spanish. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A word people use to refer to white people. It references a type of bread. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here the interviewee is refereeing to a trailer full of dead migrants that was found in La Salle, Texas weeks before the interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)